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NOTE ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SHAME¹

By THEODATE L. SMITH

In the field of emotion experimental psychology has as yet offered us but little, for only the simplest emotions have proved available for laboratory investigation, and the results of plethysmographic experiments have thus far not been commensurate with the amount of labor bestowed upon them and are lacking in definiteness. In the present study, while introspection has, of course, been the final test, the material has been drawn from anthropology, animal psychology, and the study of children and defectives. Literature and biography have also furnished illustrative material. I have found but one monograph on the subject, that of Hohenemser, which is written entirely from the introspective point of view, and his four possible types of shame are more strongly suggestive of logical than psychological possibilities and apply only to a highly developed self-consciousness.

Most psychologists seems to have overlooked the existence of shame as a separate emotion, or, at most, devoted a line or two to it in connection with allied mixed emotions. Ribot places modesty, shame, and shyness in a group of emotions which he characterizes as "based on an association of intellectual states, which is, in most cases, an association by contrast," and "presupposes a fusion, in varying proportions, of agreeable and disagreeable states." He further adds that the emotion, as a whole, differs from the sum of its constituent elements, which analysis can describe and isolate. Bain resolves shame into a dread of being condemned or ill-thought of by others. ("Emotions and Will," p. 211.) James finds the origin of the emotional states of modesty, shame, and shyness in the application to ourselves of a judgment previously formed upon others. Baldwin defines shame as a "lowered self esteem, felt with reference to something positive pertaining to self and open to the knowledge or opinion of others."

The motives most closely allied to shame and frequently confused with it are shyness, bashfulness, embarrassment, mortification, humiliation, coyness, and modesty; indeed the

¹ An unfinished paper found among the author's manuscripts after her death on February 16, 1914.

German has but one term for shame and modesty, yet modesty, whether we take it in its broader definition of "the form of timidity or shyness due to reflective self-consciousness," or the narrow anthropological definition of "physical self-respect," is not in itself a distinctively painful emotion, since unpleasantness arises only in connection with any violation of it. The confusion is indeed due to anthropology rather than to psychology, and is connected with the theory advanced by some anthropologists and by Havelock Ellis that modesty and shame have their origin in the sex instinct.

To the writer, shame introspectively considered seems to consist of a special case of what Lipps has described as *psychische Stauung*, a sort of paralysis which occurs whenever two or more tendencies, each of which tends to appropriate the psychic powers, are active, thus producing, at the point of inhibition, an accumulation of psychic force. There is always present in shame a disharmony in the content of consciousness, a feeling that the social self has lost value. It is not always fear of the opinion of others, for it is possible to be ashamed before one's self, when there is no question of the knowledge of others. This psychic paralysis is paralleled in the physical manifestations of shame, which are muscular weakness, sinking of the head, drooping of the eyes and whole body, accompanied by vaso-motor reactions, which oftenest take the form of flushing, but are sometimes manifested by pallor. In little children the tendency to hide, also manifested in fear, is apparent.

If this analysis is correct, then the capability of experiencing shame must be directly dependent upon the development of the social self-consciousness. In animals, we should expect to find it manifested only among gregarious types or those more or less domesticated and dependent upon human care and companionship; in children, as a somewhat later development than the more primitive emotions of fear and anger—and in defectives in proportion to the degree to which they are capable of becoming socialized. Is this in accordance with the facts? Observations on 814 cases of shame in children from 2 to 15 years and 402 reminiscent cases in adolescents were collected and analyzed. No cases of shame were reported in children under two years, though Preyer mentions one very doubtful example in his son at 10 months. His first positive record, however, is at 26 months. The occasions of shame in young children are very clearly reflections of their environment, typical examples being muddy clothes, dirty face, being seen with a nursing bottle after

having learned to eat, a hole in the stocking, sores on the face, being scolded in the presence of others, etc. In most of the cases it was stated that the child had either been laughed at, shamed or compared unfavorably with some other child. In children a little older, wounded pride in many forms appears. The occasion may be bodily defects, shabby clothing, awkwardness, any reproach of family or station, ridicule or expressions of disgust, social blunders or violations of etiquette. In adolescence, these same causes are frequently greatly intensified and questions of dress, manners, bearing, etc., become matters of extreme importance as sex attraction develops. The moral aspect of shame, which appears to be wholly lacking in the earlier manifestations and more or less confused during childhood, may now become very acute. Yet the fact that the moral quality in shame is not an essential characteristic is evidenced plainly by the fact that our social blunders often cause us keener suffering than do infractions of the moral law. How completely shame is conditioned by the social self is well illustrated in the following case: A boy of 14, whose mother was ill, stayed away from school to help her with the housework. He did it willingly and was rather proud of being able to help so much. But some of his schoolmates stopped to inquire the cause of his absence and found him washing dishes. The situation was immediately changed, and according to his own description, he could not have felt more ashamed if he had been caught "breaking the whole ten commandments" than he did at being caught in the, under the circumstances, morally meritorious act of washing dishes.

In considering animal shames, only those cases were retained as legitimate examples, in which fear of punishment as a possible explanation of the behavior was excluded. One or two examples will suffice to show the character of the material. A pet cat of rather a jealous disposition was shown a life-sized colored paste-board cat. It was rather a realistic representation and being carefully held so that the cat could not see the back of it, was slowly moved towards him. He growled, lashed his tail, and finally sprang at the paste-board imitation, knocking it over and revealing its falsity. Tail and ears drooped and he slunk away under a sofa. He could never again be induced to take the slightest notice of the counterfeit, turning away his head if it were thrust upon him.

That dogs are sensitive to reproach and to ridicule is attested by every careful observer of animals. Shaler gives the following account of a shepherd dog belonging to him

but from which he was often separated by several months' absence. "When after one of these absences I appear to him in the distance he comes furiously barking toward me, quite possessed by his enmity. At a certain point in his charge, a doubt appears to beset him: he moderates his pace; his roaring bark passes into a whine; and as the full measure of his blunder is borne in upon him by my voice, he becomes the picture of shame. In his perplexity, he always finds relief by endeavoring with his paw to scrape a supposititious fly from his nose. He then deals with what I suppose to be an equally imaginary flea. After he has thus gained a few seconds for readjustment, he welcomes me joyously." That reactions of a similar nature occur in a social environment of the animal's own kind is shown by the careful observations of Mr. Ordahl, who thus describes a common occurrence among his cattle when first brought in the fields. "Two young calves are testing their strength, one is pushed out of the ring; the victor raises his head stiffly and jerks his ears alternately; his eyes roll with a gleam of satisfied superiority, while the loser lowers his head, eyes are cast down and the ears hang down relaxed. This lasts for a few moments, when the matter is settled either by the loser cautiously approaching the winner in an attitude of recognized subjection or the winner administering an extra bunt as if to assure himself that the victim is a non-resisting medium."

It is in the social situations arising among gregarious animals that Lloyd Morgan finds the germs of the development of the sense of personality—and Dr. C. W. Hodge, in a paper on "The Intimations of Self-Consciousness in Animals," concludes that we must allow to dogs at least an obscure form of self-feeling. But if we admit even a rudimentary self-consciousness in animals, we have the possibility of an abasement of self which, however crude, may be considered a germinal form of shame and possibly not very different from the earlier manifestations of shame in children. Some investigations of shame in mentally defective children, not yet completed, tend also to show that their capability of feeling shame is in close correspondence with their capability of entering in social relations.

Turning to anthropology for its evidence in regard to the development of shame, we find it, for the most part, confused with modesty. Many of the studies of modesty are bound up with those on the origin of clothing and the chief point at issue is whether modesty was a factor in developing clothing or whether clothing was a chief agent in the development

of modesty. The weight of evidence seems to favor the assumption that psychological modesty preceded physical, and that clothing has been instrumental simply in the development of conventional modesty. This opinion is supported by Ploss, Stevins, Westermarck, Wallace, Foster, Rowley, and Zimmermann, who think that modesty exists quite as truly among unclothed as among civilized peoples. But even in tribes where so far as external evidence goes, modesty is apparently unknown, we find abundant evidence of shame, arising from precisely the same classes of causes or occasions as among civilized peoples. Westermarck, in his "History of Human Marriage," says: "Ideas of modesty are altogether relative and conventional. Peoples who are accustomed to tattoo themselves are ashamed to appear untattooed, peoples whose women are in the habit of covering their faces consider such a covering indispensable for every respectable woman; peoples who for one reason or another have come to conceal the navel, the knee, the bosom, blush to reveal what is hidden. It is not the feeling of shame which has provoked the covering but the covering which has provoked the feeling of shame." Ploss states that it is extremely difficult to obtain exact information in regard to the crippled feet of Chinese women as they are unwilling to allow even a physician to see them. A Chinese woman considers it improper to allow her husband to see her uncovered feet. It is only the tip of the foot encased in its miniature shoe that constitutes the admired "golden lilies" of the Chinese, and the ugly mass of deformity above, which is the penalty of these admired ornaments, is something not willingly exposed. It is possible that we have here a connection between modesty and the æsthetic feeling, since we frequently find the tendency to conceal associated with whatever may be regarded as ugly, repulsive or disgusting.

Darwin in his chapter on blushing ("Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals") records a number of examples of shame among primitive races and notes the sensitiveness of the Maoris to ridicule and cites the case of an old man who, when laughed at, blushed up to the roots of his hair. A Fuegian blushed when quizzed about polishing his shoes and otherwise adorning himself. An Arab on the Nile blushed quite up to the back of his neck when laughed at by his companions for managing his boat clumsily. Rusden in his history of Australia, in describing the corroborees of the Australians says that "the perfection of acting was aimed at by each man in the tribe," and that the unlucky wight who

committed a mistake in the public performance or missed a turn in the air was followed by the taunts of the tribe for weeks afterward. From this it would appear that rules of etiquette are quite as binding and violation of them quite as humiliating among Australian aborigines, after their own fashion, as among civilized peoples. Many other savage customs point toward the origin of shame in the social consciousness rather than in any biological facts.

The development of self-consciousness or the conscious self is for the individual a very gradual process. It begins with the bodily self. For the new-born child the universe is a series of disconnected sensations to which neither the idea of subject or object is attached. There is a pleasure-pain quality in these sensations, so far as may be judged by muscular expression, but the child does not yet know that the body which experiences these feelings of comfort and discomfort is his own. A large part of the first year of life is spent in making this discovery and even then it is by no means complete, as shown by the studies of Preyer, Hall, Shinn and others.

But before the bodily self and not self have been completely differentiated a dawning self-consciousness has already expressed itself in emotion and desire. The more primitive emotions—fear, anger, jealousy, and animosity, have appeared, and the beginnings of a social consciousness are shown in the child's responsiveness to the influences of environment, to approval and disapproval. According to Dudley Kidd this is earlier among the children of civilized than those of primitive peoples. A Kafir child will beat or bite the blanket of a person with whom he is angry and a big boy will cry if his clothing or possessions are beaten. He also confuses himself with his shadow, his name or his picture. His personality too is mixed with that of his clan. This would account for the shame and anger exhibited when the honor of the clan is violated.

With all these stages of the development of self-consciousness we find the various types of shame in man and animals closely corresponding. The immediate causes or occasions of shame vary with environment, and the intensity of the emotion varies as the development of sense of self in the individual. A moral quality appears to be attached only to types sufficiently developed to admit of a conflict between an ideal self and some content of consciousness which is in disharmony with it. But that the feeling of shame is not confined exclusively to the violation of convention among primi-

tive peoples but has an ethical value in some cases highly developed, is shown in the following case of a Navahoe Indian who, wishing to convince his interlocutor of his truth, uttered the following words: "Why should I lie to you? I am ashamed before the earth: I am ashamed before the heavens: I am ashamed before the dawn: I am ashamed before the evening twilight: I am ashamed before the blue sky: I am ashamed before the darkness: I am ashamed before the sun: I am ashamed before that standing within me which speaks with me. Some of these things are always looking at me. I am never out of sight; therefore I must tell the truth. That is why I always tell the truth. I hold my word tight to my breast."¹

As to the components which enter into the emotion, its physical manifestations and many anthropological facts point to fear, disgust, and perhaps violations of the æsthetic feeling as well as modesty as the roots from which it has developed. Genetically, then, both the physical manifestations of shame and many anthropological observations tend to show that it is a development from the more primitive emotions of fear and disgust, and violations of æsthetic feelings as well as modesty developed as to its special form through the reciprocal action of environment upon the consciousness of self.

¹ Washington Matthews: *The Study of Ethics Among the Lower Races*. J. of Am. Folk-Lore, Vol. 12, pp. 1-9.